

**ECONOMICS OF FOOD SECURITY:  
Perspectives, Potentials,  
Problematics in  
South Africa Today and Tomorrow**

**By Reginald Herbold Green**

Blessed is he that maketh  
two ears of grain to grow  
where only one grew before.

- Old Testament

Woe unto them  
who add field unto field  
until there is no place.

- ibid

Inasmuch as ye have done it  
Unto the least of these my brethren  
Ye have done it unto Me.

- Gospel

If they do not eat,  
We cannot sleep.

- Anton Rupert

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#### **Food Security: and The Right To Food Looking Ahead**

Food security is an established human right included in international conventions. That is hardly cause for surprise - the right to food is an essential component of the right to life. In extreme cases denial of the right to food is a death sentence - as in 1992 when in some Somalia refugee camps where over 15 children per 1,000 were dying each day. Even at lesser levels lack of an adequate diet prevents full mental as well as physical development of children and full ability to work hard and long (and therefore livelihood) for adults.

But actual enforcement or provision of effective access to food security is absent for literally hundreds of millions of persons and scores of millions of households. At the peak of the 1992-93 hungry year following the 1991-92 Apocalypse Drought, up to 50% of black South Africans (and perhaps 1% of white) did lack food sufficiency - in Angola and Mozambique the situation was worse and in Zimbabwe only somewhat better.

The reasons for the gap between a largely non-controversial right and its massive continued non-achievement in practice are multiple and relate to several clusters of people and countries. They do not include any physical shortfall of food production at global level and only a handful of cases in which national production plus potentially financeable imports could not provide an adequate diet. They do include - especially in Africa - many cases of low household production (especially in bad weather years) by family farmers whose access to food depends on producing it both for household provisioning and sale. In all countries they include many households with low incomes - aged, handicapped, low skills, handicapped, with too high a mouths to hands (dependent to economically active) ratio - who do not have access to effective safety nets to augment earned incomes.

Another large group are the victims of war and civil disorder - refugees, internally displaced and other affected persons. At national level there are countries which cannot meet the foreign exchange and/or fiscal burdens of importing and distributing food to calamity stricken families (e.g. Mozambique on both counts and Tanzania on the fiscal one). But perhaps the dominant causal factor is lack of high policy priority linked to effectively articulated and relatively rapidly and smoothly implemented delivery (whether of food or of purchasing power) mechanisms. It is, for example, hard to explain South Africa's 1992-93 poorer than Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Tanzania performance on any other ground than lack of adequate political priority.

### Food Security: What Do We Mean?

Food security can be defined as assured access to an adequate diet. To achieve it requires meeting two overlapping requirements. The first is adequate physical supplies of appropriate food at required locations backed by a delivery system to maintain flows. The second is an entitlement for each household (and household member) to receive adequate food whether by producing for self-provisioning, purchasing out of earned income, or receipt (directly or via cash) of transfers.

The second condition cannot be met without the first, but meeting the first is no guarantee of the second. For example, if drought wipes out household production and employment, then unless transfer payments (or direct food transfers) are available in practice as well as in theory, the absence of entitlements will prevent the afflicted households securing food even if it is physically available a few metres away.

The distinction between national and household food security is partly - but not wholly - the same as physical versus entitlement. National food security exists if production plus nationally financeable net imports plus food aid would allow providing entitlements (earned, produced, transferred) to all households and the national distribution (physical and transfer system) would allow getting it to the locations at which it is needed.

South Africa - like Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe - meets this test. Tanzania is a borderline case in drought years for financial reasons; Mozambique does not meet the test for both financial and physical distribution capacity reasons.

At household level the physical access problem may be real. At the least, it may require moving from rural areas to urban to secure transfers - a migration which gravely prejudices rehabilitation of rural livelihoods and places additional stress and expense on food entitlement deficiency afflicted households. More generally, the problem is one of inadequate transfer entitlement systems. Both aspects are real in South Africa but the more serious is the transfer entitlement systems' inadequacy in coverage, delivery capacity and finance which is primarily an issue in the political economy of priorities. The weakness of physical and informational infrastructural capacity to deliver entitlements is largely consequential on the low priority given to defending the right to food .

### The Economic Aspects of Food Security

Food security has several economic aspects:

- Impact on gross domestic product (overall output)
- Affect on number of secure, adequate livelihoods
- Implications for external account balance (exports/imports)
- Distribution of earned incomes, transfers, purchasing power
- Political economic purposes and priorities
- Moral economy.

Each is relevant to a greater or lesser extent in all countries but the balance varies. The lower the proportion of total output, of total livelihoods and of total external trade flowing from food production, the less the impact of the first three macro economic factors. Distribution is more generally relevant. High food prices relative to incomes and/or highly risky entitlements (e.g. because of drought inflicted loss of output and/or wage employment) can have very major absolute poverty impact even if food (or agricultural more generally) production is a relatively small proportion of external trade, the situation pertaining in South Africa.

Political economic considerations determine not only how much is allocated to transfer payments but to whom. In 1992-93, official South Africa drought relief transfer payments were about three quarters directed to sustaining the solvency of agricultural credit institutions and white

farmers - i.e., not to food security as normally understood. On the other hand, Botswana's and Zimbabwe's allocations were about nine tenths directed via food rations, supplementary feeding through the health and education systems and special works programmes to provide earned (cash) income entitlements to buy food - i.e., they were targeted on providing a food security safety net. This divergence basically reflects the different priorities of the South African government (and especially the Ministry of Finance) from those of the Botswanan and Zimbabwean governments.

Moral economy is Adam Smith's term. He argued that no country could be great or prosperous the majority of whose people were poor and miserable. This can be argued on productivity (basic human social and economic investment) and macro purchasing power (poor households cannot provide large, dynamic, buoyant markets) grounds. However, Smith also saw it as a moral imperative. Further, he perceived a central duty of the state as providing an enabling environment in which people could become, be and remain free of absolute poverty - a perspective reflected in present World Bank thinking and operational directives (if not always in country programme priorities).

To a large extent these economic perspectives are complementary. There are trade-offs, but on the whole the moral economy case - which necessarily calls for a political economic agenda to reduce absolute poverty - is good production macroeconomics. The main exception relates to unempowerable (or structural) food insecure (and 'normally' insufficient) households. These are:

- a. households with an inadequate ratio of labour power to members (hands to mouths);
- b. households who are structurally unemployable (or employable/self-employable only at very low productivity) because of macro and sectoral economic characteristics which cannot be transformed except over a substantial number of years, for example many largely un- or mal-educated township residents between 18 and 30 years of age.

The first group in South Africa - as in Southern and Sub-Saharan Africa more generally - comprises largely aged persons and households with no or inadequate pensions (state, former employer, family), crippled persons and their households and single working age member households with several

dependents (in practice female headed households without substantial remittance incomes).

The second group in South Africa - again parallel to Southern Africa and SSA - comprises rural and urban households whom the present economic structure locks out of both recorded wage employment and those informal/small scale wage, household and self-employment activities which are of high enough productivity to yield decent incomes. These households - unlike the first cluster - can be provided with access to livelihoods (e.g. land reform and agrarian reform more generally, enhancing small scale production's productivity and links to larger economic units) but this is a slow process. For those who have missed out on education and been involved for years in violent struggle (whether as combatants in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe or as "comrades" in South Africa's townships) employability is highly problematic.

A narrow economic case for providing food security (plus health and education) for the 60% to 70% of these persons who are children can be made. So, less confidently, can one be made out for the macroeconomic gains of enhancing market size. Beyond that (especially in respect to aged and crippled persons) the case is essentially a moral economy one. Up to a point one can make a case that grave food insecurity leads to social unrest and violence which are economically damaging, but absolutely poor and starving people rarely are able to overthrow regimes. How a society treats its least well off and least physically productive members tells a great deal about its capacity for reconciliation, solidarity, mobilisation and dynamic stability. One can say with a 19th Century economist of some note, that the problem with a major famine (in Ireland) was that it did not kill enough persons to make the economy viable, or one can stand with Adam Smith, the Old and New Testaments and Koran and the 1970s and 1990s World Bank on the moral economy issue. Or one can simply fail to face up to the choice which may be comfortable for an individual but when practiced by a state (as in South Africa) has devastating human consequences.

#### Food Insecurity, Food Insufficiency and Apartheid

Strictly speaking, food insecurity applies to persons/households/countries which in normal years do have adequate supplies of and entitlements to food but are at serious risk of losing them - to unemployment or access to land, drought or other calamities, terms of trade shifts (domestic or external)

and/or war or other catastrophes. Persistent food insufficiency in virtually all years (structural absolute poverty) is not logically characterised as insecurity.

In practice, this division is often not made. Operationally severe food insufficiency especially at widespread, life threatening levels, is normally the focus of policy efforts and one which is both larger and higher on the political priority list when food insecurity has sharply raised the previous numbers of households with food insufficiency - as in the 1991/92 drought, 1992/93 food security crises in South and Southern Africa. Further, the Swahili proverb - give a rich man less food and he will grow thin; give a poor man less food and he will die - applies. These persons with moderate pre-existing food insufficiency (especially children and aged persons) are most at risk when food insecurity imposes greater cuts. In this paper food insecurity/insufficiency are addressed jointly.

But it does make sense to differentiate between calamity and/or catastrophe (natural and man-made food supply and entitlement crises) caused food insecurity and structural food insufficiency (absolute poverty) in analysing particular causes, policies and results. It is argued that land (more accurately agrarian since the main production and livelihood gains have come from making possible more production by black farmers on land to which they already had access) has not reduced food insecurity in Zimbabwe. If this means that in catastrophic drought years even family farmers with normally adequate livelihoods are at risk, of course it is true.

Similarly, if it means that the agrarian reform on existing access land has enabled up to a third of black farming households to achieve adequate livelihoods but has left at least a half at, near or below the absolute poverty line in normal weather years, that too is true. Neither point, however, is an argument against agrarian reform and the latter is in fact one in favour of land reform.

Similarly, the reality of a large number of chronically (the moral implications of saying "normally" rather argue against that term) food insufficient households, argue for a baseline transfer and a permanent earned entitlement enhancing programme for food security/adequacy with broader front transfer and future vulnerability reduction programmes in calamity/catastrophe years. In practice all years have some calamities - e.g. some areas in South Africa have been severely drought afflicted over

1992/1993 ensuring area specific food insecurity/famine risk in them over 1993/1994. However, again there is a distinction between permanent, area specific emergency programmes and disaster years such as 1992/1993.

Neither absolute poverty nor calamities are simply emanations of apartheid and its extended family. Absolute poverty has been endemic in Africa (most notably geographically in Ethiopia and structurally for unempowerable households with weak extended family links) for several centuries. Calamity and catastrophe-linked food insecurity and famine can be traced back as far as written and oral history go (not excluding Joseph's brethren and - an early food security success - Joseph's work as Governor of Egypt in establishing physical inter year grain reserves as recorded in the Old Testament). Absolute poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa ranges from perhaps 20% (excluding Seychelles, Mauritius and post-transfer entitlement Botswana) to over 60% (catastrophe afflicted Angola, Mozambique, Somalia and - probably - Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan) and food insecurity from drought is high in a majority of cases. South Africa at 30% to 35% in normal and 40% to 45% in calamity years is about 'average'; a devastating commentary on the political economy of a country whose per capita output is about five times the average.

However, while ending apartheid and its agnates is not a sufficient condition for food security, it is - in practice - a necessary one for starting and sustaining the long march toward it. Botswana and Tanzania (to take two countries with sharply divergent resource levels) have lower levels of food insecurity and - increasingly - of moderate and (especially) severe malnutrition than does South Africa. The reasons relate primarily to political economic priorities and political structures. Both leaderships have been concerned to reduce absolute poverty and hunger as both economic and moral imperatives. Most politicians are dependent on the votes of poor rural persons cast in competitive (whether multi or single party) elections. It is simply inconceivable that in 1992/1993 either would have made bailing out rural credit institutions its overriding priority in response to drought and the threat of famine as the South African regime could and did do.

#### Macro Economics And Food Security In South Africa

In respect to domestic output, meeting food security requirements purely by empowerment would in normal weather years entail an output increase at



urban retail food prices of the order of perhaps R 6,000 to R 7,500 million or about 2.5% to 3% of present gross domestic product. However, it would not - in macroeconomic logic - necessitate any additional production of food because in normal years food insufficiency at household level is purely an entitlement caused problem and in severe drought years imports can - at macro level - be financed.

The R 5,000 to R 6,000 million estimate is based on a rough estimate (guesstimate) of 2 million to 2.5 million absolutely poor households needing on average R 2,000 to R 2,500 annually to reach the absolute poverty line, i.e., R 4,000 to R 5,000 additional cash or household self-provisioning (so-called subsistence) income for absolutely poor households plus R 1,500 to R 3,000 salary and capital (including depreciation) linked output within the empowerment programmes.

At one level this is an underestimate of gains and an overestimate of costs. Neither land, labour nor capital stock in South Africa are anywhere close to full employment. Therefore, once the structural and investment requirements of the new production were met (no easy hurdles) a multiplier output gain could be expected.

At a different level, the output increase and more particularly the scope of a poor people's production enhancement approach is overstated because perhaps a third of absolutely poor households are unempowerable. They cannot escape absolute poverty primarily through additional earned income because their command over labour power is quantitatively and/or qualitatively insufficient. While enhancing their purchasing power would have a multiplier response, the direct transfer payments would have a neutral or negative (depending how financed) direct impact on output.

The calamity year output loss calculations are somewhat different. Because total agricultural output is well under 10% of GDP, even a once in a century drought (1991-1992) will have a direct negative impact on output of at most 2.5% to 3% and a total one (including negative multiplier impact) of perhaps 5%. In 1992 that probably meant the difference between potential growth of 1% to 2% and actual shrinkage of about 3%. How much effective food security strategies would reduce such losses - or more specifically their direct component as sustained entitlements would largely avert the multiplier loss - would depend on the balance between pure consumption support transfers and public works employment which did

generate output (even though not of food). A reasonably effective, largely work for wages for food strategy could reduce it by at least half.

The livelihood (employment broadly defined) implications of/requirements for food security in normal years illustrate the problems rather more clearly than do the macro output ones. Excluding unempowerable households of the order of 1,500,000 to 1,750,000 households need enhanced household incomes from more employed members and/or higher productivity and pay employment/self-employment by presently active members.

To define this requirement is virtually to admit that it can in practice be met only in a much more buoyant employment/livelihood context than has existed for a decade and a half. Further, the nature of the livelihood requirement strongly suggests that relatively labour intensive, household production (including, but not limited to, agrarian and land reform enabled small black family farming household production) would need to be a focus. A 2½% to 3% increase in total output within the present physical, technical and economic parameters (even abstracting from apartheid - or considering post-apartheid considerations) would have a trivial effect on livelihoods of absolutely poor households and, therefore, on their food entitlements.

The drought downside impact probably had serious negative consequences for the livelihoods of 650 to 750 thousand households. Of the order of 450,000 were year round agricultural wage employees fired, seasonal ones not hired, black family farmers. urban wage employees fired or working short time and self-employed or informal sector wage employed urban similarly seriously negatively affected by the multiplier effect. At a rough guess about half these households were absolutely poor pre-drought and were pushed from absolute poverty down to near or total destitution so that the overall increase in absolutely poor and food insufficient households was from 2,000,000-2,500,000 to 2,350,000-2,750,000 (about 40% to 45% of the national population and half the black population).

The impact of achieving an end to normal year food insufficiency on external account depends on the balance between additional production/incomes and transfer payments and on the make-up of the additional production. If all of the empowerment were through transfers and/or all the additional production was domestic market oriented (e.g. housing) the direct negative impact could be as high as R 1,500 million export loss (food redirected from exports to poor households) plus R 1,500

million additional imports. Because South Africa's economy is - and will for the foreseeable future remain - external account constrained whenever output growth is buoyant, this would be an untenable direction to take in seeking to overcome absolute poverty. A structural external account worsening of nearly 2% of GDP is not acceptable.

However, if a substantial portion of the direct additional output were to be agricultural production by poor black family farmers and exportables (or somewhat less plausibly import substitutes and basic consumer goods) had a substantial weight in other production, then the external account effect could be relatively limited and within the capacity of a parallel export expansion strategy (needed in any event to bolster import capacity). Like the livelihood requirements, the external balance considerations do point to agrarian (as well as land) reform to enable black family farmers to raise overall output as well as their own incomes, i.e., not just substitute for the structurally economically non-viable one half to two-thirds of small and medium scale white farmers (who do not account for a similar proportion of agricultural output - perhaps a fifth to a quarter).

The drought crisis had a major negative direct external payments impact in 1992. Agricultural exports (not all food) were R 2,000 million below what would otherwise have been achieved and additional food imports were over R 1,500 million higher.

The loss of output, entitlements and effective demand both reduced non-food imports (consumer, intermediate and capital) below what they otherwise would have been and probably pushed some output into the export market. The deflationary (i.e. output constraining) policies of the Reserve Bank continued to squeeze imports and domestic demand (with at least some production switched to exports) in a way rather startling in the third year of depression and at least tenth of near stagnation and falling trend output per capita. In addition, the recurrent tendency to adopt policies contributing to creeping over-valuation of the rand represented another self-inflicted wound which could - and should - have been avoided.

#### The Economics of Distribution and Food Security

In normal weather years not marked by macroeconomic disaster, the economics of food security at household level are a mixed structural problem of distribution and redistribution. Distribution would empower the households

to buy (or grow) food by creating an enabling environment in which they could raise their earned incomes; redistribution would provide transfer payments to achieve empowerment as far as expenditure, albeit not earned income, was concerned. For the perhaps two-thirds of absolutely poor households who are not unempowerable (aged, disabled, single adult headed) the distributional approach is preferable on macroeconomic, households self-respect, self-reliance and political/fiscal sustainability grounds. For the unempowerable there is no real alternative to extended family, community, voluntary organisation and/or state financed redistribution.

In fact, the distinctions between distribution and redistribution and between empowerable and unempowerable are not as clear-cut as the above would suggest.

- public works employment - if properly designed, managed and supported - is distributional more than redistributive, but has the fiscal and some of the political sustainability problems of redistribution.
- nominally empowerable persons/households may be very hard to empower either for structural reasons (e.g. barriers to small scale, labour intensive production; lack of accessible child care facilities for female workers) or because of the characteristics of the potential workers (e.g. those who have received a smattering of formal non-education after 1970 and a political mass action education not conducive to normal employment/self-employment patterns in the 1980s and 1990s).

The distribution/redistribution aspects of coping with maintaining food security during a calamity and of supporting restoration of livelihoods/reduction of vulnerability thereafter is, on the face of it, one of redistribution. That is a valid perception in the sense that finance has to come from the same sources and poses most of the same problems as consumption transfers, even if it takes a different form, e.g. work for food employment.

However, in a different sense there is a major difference. Work for food approaches enable households (especially rural ones) to remain in place and to maintain the dignity of being workers not dependent clients - both favourable to speedy livelihood rehabilitation. Further, they can provide valuable - especially to structural shifts toward environments more

friendly to poor household income augmentation and small farm vulnerability reduction - infrastructure which is just as much production as any other type of infrastructure. The efficiency of this means of producing fixed capital depends largely on pre-calamity analysis, design and standby structure construction (whoever is to handle the physical operation - e.g. small scale construction teams for low cost housing, village councils or user committees for small scale irrigation and potable water provision). That there are problems is true, but the number of white elephant large scale infrastructure projects from the nuclear power plant to empty international conference centres underlines that they are by no means unique to this facet of/approach to infrastructure creation.

The bottom line problem in South Africa has - at one level - been finance, whether for traditional handouts of food or for a more efficient and complex strategic approach. In 1992/1993 with up to 750,000 families affected severely, needing perhaps R 2,000 each on average plus administration/delivery costs, even a straight food transfer scheme would have needed over R 2,000 million in addition to chronic food insufficiency alleviation. On the face of it, public plus private funding of total food assistance was of that order of magnitude suggesting perhaps 50% of the drought and 20% of the 'normal' requirements were met.

#### Political Economy And Moral Economy Issues

Government drought relief expenditure over 1992/1993 appears to have been in excess of R 6,000 million depending precisely what is put under that rubric. How then can it be said that under R 1,000 million actually went to alleviate food insecurity and - if so - why? The answers turn on the political economic priorities of the regime.

Apparently about 80% of the finance went to bail out rural credit providers (much of it on debt which was highly risky or worse before the drought) i.e., an exercise in financial institutional security enhancing. This did to a degree shore up the household economies of small and medium scale white farmers, many of whom are structurally unviable (and have a distinct lack of enthusiasm either for the present regime or for democratic transition), but probably only in the short run. In that sense it both renders agrarian reform harder and increases food insecurity in the medium term. Other analyses yield lower totals but, significantly, the same focus on bailing out white farmers and lenders to them not putting food into poor

black households cooking utensils. Much of the balance of the funding went directly to these farmers with nominal sub-allocation to their not retrenching permanent black workers (but not to their hiring seasonal ones). A certain amount was allotted to vulnerability reducing works - especially rural water - but not focused on hiring entitlement losers and in any event suddenly cut off when finance was redirected to the apparent overriding goal of cleaning up rural lending institution books.

Both the limited funds allocated, and the appallingly slow and complex means for actual food deliverer/distributors to gain access to it, underline that keeping adequate meals on poor drought afflicted household tables was very low on the regime's political economic priority list. The parallel proposals from a nominally liberal minister to limit free access to health care of poor households and to abolish universal (in principle at least) old age pensions underline that absolute poverty reduction is not only not a high priority but that its mechanics (or even the mechanics of not worsening it) have simply not been thought through.

It is tempting to assume that with the advent of a transitional government, or at least its successor under a new constitution, all such priority problems will vanish as speedily as Jo'burg's occasional snows do. True such a government would - perforce given its constituency - put absolute poverty reduction and calamity alleviation squarely on the agenda. But it too would have serious problems especially in respect to safety nets.

South Africa faces an overdetermined situation on the political economic front and one yet more overdetermined if reconciliation means great caution and only marginal action in redistributing away from far from poor (and, which is the point, in some cases far from unproductive) households and enterprises. Reconciliation's priority safety nets may well be for outgoing politicians and civil servants to avert de facto sabotage of transition and make affirmative action easier. Up to a point this may be resources well allocated - whatever the views one holds of the recipients.

Similarly, the urgent need to increase output, livelihoods, exports and investible (including human and social investment) surpluses does pose a competing claim on limited resources and one which is - or can be - based on raising the rate at which poor households become more productive and thus independently food secure. The only way to escape from an agonising overdetermination problem on the political economic prioritisation front

would be to achieve a very rapid breakthrough to sustainable 8% annual growth with most of the proceeds directed to investment, to empowering poor households to produce more and to safety nets for unempowerable and calamity victim households. Unfortunately, no serious student of the South African economy views such a breakthrough as remotely possible in this century.

Therefore, a moral economy outlook shift is doubly necessary even if in the actual and projectable resource availability context it cannot be sufficient to do more than halt the growth in numbers of empowerable absolutely poor households by - say - 1995 and reduce them up to - say - a quarter or a third by 2000 while knotting up new strands to close the most egregious holes in both 'normal' and calamity safety net provision. That is not as defeatist an agenda as it may sound - it would mark a major shift in perspective, hopefully catalysed by the government but going well beyond it to communities, voluntary organisations, enterprises and non-poor households. Further, it would reverse negative trends which have endured now for at least a decade (somewhat disguised because the economically less weak minority of black South Africans have been able to win some real economic gains). A transformed perspective and a trend in the desired direction would be a foundation and structural frame for much more rapid building of food security/absolute poverty reduction over the first decade of the 2000s.

#### Related Issues: Environment, Population, Women, Children

Food security (insecurity) and environment - including ecological and livelihood sustainability - interrelate. Need - especially at absolute poverty/survival levels - is frequently ecologically devastating. If a household has the 'choice' of using practices (on cultivation and/or fuel collection) it knows damage the ecology and will be disastrous for future yields and practising 'sound husbandry' at the price of starving now, there is no choice.

It is both arrogant and ignorant to presume African farming households neither care about the land nor about future generations or even that they have no working knowledge of conservation and sustainability. It is the heritage of land theft, people-dumping and absolute poverty that forces actions predicated on present survival. The ways forward include:

- access to more land
- and to complementary resources
- together with supplementary off farm (or on farm conservation/vulnerability reduction paid employment) livelihood inputs
- as well as to additional knowledge and infrastructure conducive to environmental protection and restoration.

The medium sized white farming sub-sector is also environmentally damaging. Historically its practices have been unsustainable and land/pasture degrading. In the past decade as the sub-sector's economic viability (including "white living standards" for the owner) eroded and the debt servicing burden escalated, the pace of environmental damage rose. One case for land reform is that smaller, less capital intensive units not weighed down by either mechanisation costs or the need to cover - say - R 50,000 minimum, cash owner household consumption could afford to be rather more environmentally friendly.

Population is a politically as well as an economically explosive topic. Clearly, poverty in South Africa is not substantially the result of population growth and the per capita resource demands of the top 10% - and top 25% - of the population are quite disproportionate to those of the bottom 25% to 40% who face serious food insecurity and/or insufficiency.

However, reducing the adequate livelihood and entitlement gaps and mobilising resources for achieving universal access to basic social and human services (including food security safety nets for those who are unempowerable or calamity afflicted) are not made easier (to understate the case) by rapid population growth. South Africa is arguably not land short, it most certainly is both water and allocable surplus (for basic services and productive investment) constrained.

But the response of making child spacing/family planning services available - even on a non-coercive, non-manipulative basis (far from the present situation) - is afflicted by tunnel vision. Yes, access to child spacing knowledge and material should be part of universal primary health services. But that is not enough and is not the area in which the most action is needed.



Falling infant mortality, rising access to education (especially for girls and women), falling food insufficiency (and absolute poverty), rising access to old age security from sources other than surviving children are historically (and logically) linked to falling desired and actual birthrates and - with a lag - falling population growth. Enhancing food security can do more to reduce population growth (as well as being much less controversial) than universal access to pills and injections with no improvement in poor person nutritional entitlements.

Food security has clear gender aspects of at least two kinds. First, a higher proportion of food insufficient and insecure adults are women than men (perhaps 55% to 60% children, 25% to 30% adult women, 15% to 20% adult men). This is not primarily because of intra household mal-distribution of food, but because most large single adult households are female headed and because women earn less than men.

Second, women in the traditional division of labour and of budgetary responsibility have special responsibilities (primary in most rural contexts) for food, water and fuel, i.e., housekeeping including keeping cooked food on the table. Therefore, the burden of coping with chronic or crisis food shortfalls rests particularly grievously on poor women. In practice, water and fuel access and entitlement problems are closely correlated with those of food whether on the production and/or purchase or on the endemic scarcity/episodic calamity shortfall front.

Children comprise the majority of the food insecure and deprived. Because of lack of entitlements link to overall poverty this goes claw in claw with inadequate access to pure water, decent housing, warm clothing and heating and education. The present and future human and the future economic consequences are only too clear. South Africa may have a surplus of low quality labour maimed by lack of education, health and strength but it is increasingly short of well educated, energetic, high productivity economically active people. These costs are exacerbated by the fact that children are far less able to survive protracted hunger without permanent physical mental and emotional damage.

It should perhaps be pointed out that children are not a higher proportion of food insecure/absolutely poor households because these households are above average in size. On balance the reverse is true. But household income is not significantly correlated with the number of children.

Therefore, at any absolute income level a higher proportion of households with more than two non-working members to one bread winner will be food insufficient or insecure and most non-working persons are children. Further, rural households tend to be larger than urban (although this is perhaps more a consequence of apartheid than of modern Southern African social patterns - in Mozambique the reverse appears to be the case albeit perhaps as a consequence of apartheid's 1980s export of its brutal struggle for survival in the form of aggressive direct and proxy war). And rural households are more likely to be chronically absolutely poor (only partly because of white farmer exploitation and 'homeland' dumping) than are urban.

It certainly should be stressed that there is no road to healthy, happy, well-fed, fully educated, decently housed and clad children in absolutely poor households. Some programmes - in nutrition as well as health and education - can focus on children but the core of any realistic strategy (beyond a grab, dab and jab feeding/vaccination programme in a massive child death crisis situation analogous to Somalia 1992/1993) must turn on empowering and entitling households.

The same applies to women but with a difference. Empowering women requires equal access but effective equal access taking into account their past disadvantages and their present homeworking workloads. These mean not ghettoizing "women's" issues in a 'femalestan' optic but relating programmes to the needs and capacities of those seeking empowerment/entitlements. It is no more sensible to suppose identical extension/input supply programmes meet male and female farmer needs equally than that similar homogenization for horticulturalists and pastoralists would make good sense. Similarly, health services for women should not be limited to stereotyped female and child aspects but should include them - neo-natal tetanus means that pregnant (or preferably all child-bearing age) women are priority recipients for tetanus toxoid vaccination; excessive workloads means that hypertension is likely to be as significant for women as for men.

#### Food Security, Water, Fuel, Health Services, Livelihood and Safety Nets

Food security must go beyond food. In the narrow sense this is true because water is a necessary complement of food, cooking a link between many raw foods and nutrition and inadequate preventative and simple

curative (e.g. oral rehydration) health services frequently lead to health (ill-health) conditions reducing the nutritional impact of available food.

These considerations are particularly relevant in rural areas, during droughts and in the context of domestically displaced persons and refugees. In 1992 most internally displaced persons (and new Mozambican refugees) were fleeing drought, and two cities of 500,000 or more souls (Bulawayo and Beira) were on the brink of having to be evacuated before rains/riverain flows restored their water supplies. Similarly, drought reduces both the supply of collectable fuel and the cash available to buy alternatives (especially kerosine or coal) with disastrous ecological and workload (especially women's workload) impact.

Beyond these physical links is the economic structural one via entitlements. The largest cause of food insufficiency is inadequately productive and/or remunerated livelihoods and the second largest cause of food insecurity general economically mediated loss of livelihood. (The largest is drought linked loss of livelihood and the third largest has been and may still be forced population movement from employment or production friendly areas to the wastelands at the heart of most 'homelands'.) Livelihood creation and enhancement cannot, as a whole, be treated usefully as a sub-topic of food security but both food security and livelihood strategic formulation, programmatic articulation and implementation need to recognise the linkage explicitly and to run iterative consistency cross-checks between the two sectors.

Safety nets (transfer entitlements) are also a topic in themselves, but one which needs close links with food security particularly in a calamity or catastrophe context. The non-crisis role of safety nets relates to unempowerable households (including single person households). Its basic components are old age pensions (as pioneered in SSA by South Africa but now rather more creatively used by Namibia) and cash transfer systems based on readily identifiable/testable unempowerability criteria (as in the 40,000 plus household Mozambican urban "food support" scheme). In these cases it is not evident that any administrative link to food security programming is either necessary or desirable. Certainly literal rations or even food stamps are on balance greatly inferior to cash transfers (preferably on a household basis and in the non-old age pension cases to its senior female member as the one basically responsible for keeping food

on the table). The argument that recipients will waste the money is not borne out globally, by experience of Namibian and South African old age pension use nor by Mozambique "food support" financed spending (75% food, 10-15% fuel and water, 5% soap, under 10% other including basic clothing). Absolutely poor households are not unaware of their needs and - at least in contexts where absolute poverty is common - what most are deprived of is neither common sense nor responsible conduct but material resources.

In calamity and catastrophe contexts safety net food security may need to be involved in food distribution, albeit the less it has to be so involved consistent with maintaining effective access/entitlement to food the better. If there is a working, non-oligopolised, commercial marketing system (including functioning transport) then ensuring adequate physical supplies (if from food aid it can be on-sold to the commercial sector) plus work programmes for afflicted households hopefully focusing on livelihood and infrastructural rehabilitation relevant to reducing future vulnerability to food insecurity (as in the 1984/85 Zimbabwe programme) are optimal and to a large degree attainable.

Soup kitchens ("wet rations") may provide a screening device, appeal to humanitarian instincts and be quickly set up, but in other respects they are unsound. First, they are hard to create in rural areas and so force displacement to urban. Second, - even as opposed to dry rations, much less employment, i.e., "work for food" - they maximise dependence. Third, they gravely damage the commercial sector (not least its small scale and informal livelihood aspects). Fourth, they are cost inefficient - dry food is more fungible and less service intensive than wet, and cash more fungible than food. Their prevalence, and acceptance as a large scale permanent feature of, South African food insufficiency alleviation is both unusual and alarming.

The case for providing temporary employment is not disciplinary. It turns on enabling households to stay in place to rehabilitate their livelihoods (especially rural ones) for the post crisis period, preserving their self-reliance and self-respect (a public works job and a dish out of free meals are not at all the same thing), doing the least possible damage to commerce and commercial transport, minimising distribution and bureaucratic costs, utilising otherwise unemployed labour time on infrastructural and other work benefiting absolutely poor households and communities and - where

possible (e.g. reafforestation, erosion control, water system improvement, small scale irrigation) - reducing future vulnerability to food insecurity causing calamities. The problems to be overcome are having a skeleton institutional structure and a shelf of types of project in hand (and ticking over on the local calamity business nearly certain to exist every year) ready to be put in gear when calamity strikes and the fact that useful work programmes do require complementary inputs and so cost more than pure cash or dry ration distribution (not necessarily than a fragmented soup kitchen approach with comparable coverage).

### Toward Food Security: What Might Be Done?

Food security enhancement - both in itself and as an integral part of absolute poverty reduction - needs to be placed squarely on the political economic priority agenda of the transitional and constitutional government of South Africa. More generally, it needs - primarily by a moral economy case (argued on normative, social and political stability and economic grounds) to become central to South African political economic discourse and dialogue. Some progress has already been made on the second front among groups as diverse (and not automatically absolute poverty reduction oriented in practice) as trade union leaders (and members) and big business leaders (albeit, one fears, not middle level and shop floor management).

In tackling this challenge three caveats must be made:

- no single measure can, by itself, 'solve' food insecurity and insufficiency - an interlocking package approach will be needed
- the prime target to 1995 has to be halting the rise in numbers of absolutely poor households and creating a minimally effective, broad access safety net for unempowerable and calamity stricken households with the 2000 goal a reduction of underlying absolute poverty to 20% to 25% and achievement of calamity alleviation programmes comparable in coverage and quality to Zimbabwe's 1984/85 one and Botswana's rolling programmes - no speedy abolition of food insufficiency is attainable
- efficiency - as an adjective relating to absolute poverty and food insecurity food reduction goals not as an abstract ideological noun fronting for unregulated, manipulated marketism - is important. As Mwalimu Nyerere stressed, wasting resources (inefficiency) even in

support of a commendable objective is a sin in a poor country. Good intentions deserve good analysis, competent resource deployment and incisive monitoring and review

The primary road to reducing food insufficiency has to be empowering poor households to produce more. Components to such a strategy are relatively well known:

- agrarian reform providing small family sector farmers access to markets, to knowledge and extension, to research programmes tailored to their needs and capacities and to credit (as in Zimbabwe)
- land reform providing landless or near landless households desiring to become family farmers, access (on affordable terms) to adequate and appropriate land
- providing a similar enabling environment for non-crop family farm household incomes from handicraft and processing production, employment in nearby enterprises and/or state funded (not necessarily state operated) infrastructural and conservation oriented fixed investment
- removing barriers to small scale and household non-farm enterprises and exploring what inputs of targeted training, technical assistance and - perhaps - credit guarantees would be facilitating to them as well as building up healthy sub-contracting or niche product (e.g. low income housing, small scale public buildings and works, uniforms and building furnishings) purchase links between large scale enterprises and public purchasing programmes and small scale enterprises
- improving the quality (and coverage) not only of primary and applied secondary/tertiary education but also - perhaps especially - of applied, catch up (remedial) adult education to avert discarding the 18-30 year old adults discarded, ignored or unprepared by post educational systems
- achieving effective (without cost exclusions) universal access to primary health care especially preventative and educational - like applied education crucial to enhancing poor household productivity and earning power

- restructuring infrastructure provision and construction more generally toward cost (and employment) efficient labour intensive approaches both as major ongoing livelihood generation/enhancement instrument and as the main means to meet temporary food access protection/livelihood restoration/vulnerability reduction goals when calamities strike.

There is no doubt that each of these approaches - when related to poor households' self-perceived capacities and needs, to local contexts, to resource availability patterns and to practicable operational/managerial structures can and does work. The problems lie in coordinating a series of small scale decentralised activities within national guide-lines to achieve a coherent, broad front dynamic, of selling this approach to macro economists and financiers more used to large scale hard data policies (e.g. interest rates) or projects (e.g. hydroelectric dams) and of avoiding a high proportion of really badly designed or incompetently run activities at local level.

These instruments when coordinated into a poverty reduction strategy can be cost efficient in respect to livelihoods and output. It is likely that - including supporting human and social infrastructure - broad front three to five year rural livelihood enhancing programmes could at a gross cost of R 7,500 per household (excluding land and livestock purchases) enable up to 500,000 black households to become family farmers with livelihoods at or above the absolute poverty line. There is reason to suppose that many households would wish to participate in well-designed agrarian reform and could by the fifth year be generating additional incomes per household equal to at least half of the programmes five year gross expenditure with tax revenues from higher incomes/purchases covering related basic service and infrastructural maintenance costs and a potentially break-even external balance result.

Because enabling measures for similar urban livelihood enhancement are far costlier - and harder to design - such a recreation of a viable black family farming sector is a priority. It cannot 'solve' absolute poverty - it can enable perhaps 20% of presently afflicted households (about a third of empowerable ones) to climb out of it. Further, it is probable that less capital and - perhaps - bought input intensive family farming would be more economically viable than many present capital and purchased input intensive

white family farms which, without heavy continuing subsidies, are likely to go bankrupt.

The parallel to production enhancement is safety net provision. Again the basic building blocks are identifiable:

- universal old age pensions (clawed back in the case of occupational pension recipients) at or above individual poverty line level
- parallel severe disability pensions
- income supplements for other unempowerable households with eligibility tests simple and objective and with a back-up community (religious, local government, voluntary) agency back-up for households not reachable by broad brush criteria screening techniques
- work for food calamity offset programmes (including for workers directly or indirectly not hired, laid off and/or put on short time working outside agriculture) as a borderline instrument between production enhancement and food on the table underwriting consumption transfers.

Once again, functioning examples of each exist in Southern Africa. Their main limitation is coverage and, in some cases, unit costs preventing broad coverage particularly in countries with GDP of under \$500 per capita per annum. While coordination and efficiency are serious barriers to achieving coordinated, goal promotion efficient programmes, the bottom line difficulty in South Africa is likely to be fiscal burden. Unlike the poor person production enhancing focus, this one (with the exception of work for food capital investment) does not have high enhanced output to programme cost ratios.

### In Conclusion - Looking Ahead

Food security - including overcoming endemic food insufficiency - is an important production economic as well as livelihood and moral economic goal. In South Africa, which has both a high proportion of absolutely poor households in normal years and high calamity linked food insecurity risks, it is a central economic, as well as social and political, issue.



Rough orders of magnitude are 2,000,000 to 2,500,000 absolutely poor households in non-drought crisis years - about 30% to 35% of the total population and up to 40% of the black population. (There are absolutely poor white households but probably under 1% of the white communities and of the overall absolutely poor household group.)

The number of households whose food security (entitlements) were severely impacted by the 1991/92 drought is of the order of 650,000 to 750,000; or up to 5,000,000 persons. Somewhat over half are rural family farm or agricultural worker households and the balance small town and urban area households hit by the macroeconomic consequences of the drought. Perhaps half these households were already in absolute poverty and have been pushed deeper into it. That implies an early 1993 level of 15,000,000 to 20,000,000 food insufficient households. This approaches 50% of the total population and may exceed half of all South African black people.

Because of the heritages of apartheid and its agnates, the economic structure - both through gross inequality (paralleled only by Brazil among middle income economies with substantial core industrial sectors) and also from patterns of production/technology/capital intensity - is ill-adapted to achieving rapid increases in food security through enhancing poor household livelihoods. A 5% overall growth rate within present production structures and patterns would certainly slow the growth of absolute poverty. It is doubtful it would halt, much less reverse, it.

Resource limitations have hampered calamity food insecurity mitigation and absolute poverty reduction. That will be true under any government, but has been even more pronounced to date because putting or keeping food on hungry/absolutely poor black household's tables is very low on the regime's political economic priority list, and only nominally does it subscribe to Adam Smith's moral economy imperative for the reduction of the proportion of poor and miserable households. (This is a racist heritage - its 1930s ancestors did give priority to the structural overcoming of white absolute poverty.)

Therefore, more resources are needed, but in parallel four other conditions need to be met:

- public, private institutional and government understanding, acceptance and commitment to the moral economy case

- placing sufficiency and security of household food entitlements well up on the political economic priority agenda
- finding out the needs, wishes and capacities of different clusters of poor households (especially by asking them) as a basis for designing ways forward through more efficient service provision - production enhancement - safety net - enabling environment
- adopting absolute poverty reduction and calamity impact limitation strategies backed by articulated programmes and policies (and by significant fiscal resources) which are integrated into and integral to overall economic strategy.

This is a twenty to thirty year perspective. But the initial stage is urgent and can be 12 to 24 months - achieving a workable coalition in favour of priority to act to achieve food security and sufficiency. Partly in parallel, a 36 month initial implementation could (given relatively rapid political and confidence transitions) lead to a halt in the growth of food insufficiency. By 2000 significant reductions in endemic absolute poverty and - especially - calamity related increases would then be possible. But the 1995-2000 reduction stage is possible only if the 1993-1994 agenda building/support mobilisation one begins to pick up momentum, mass support and visibility now.

#### AUTHOR NOTE

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